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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000837

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E.O. 12958: DECL: N/A  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KWMN](#) [PINR](#) [KU](#)  
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: CELEBRATING INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY BY  
ENCOURAGING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Ref: A) KUWAIT 760  
B) KUWAIT 255  
C) KUWAIT 85  
D) 05 KUWAIT 2171

¶1. (U) Attorney and women's activist Najla Al-Naki hosted on March 6 the Kuwaiti Women's Forum in celebration of International Women's Day. PolAsst attended the event designed to strengthen the political power and influence of Kuwaiti women. Approximately 50 women from different fields gathered to listen to speeches and poems supporting women's rights and to support female entrepreneurs who displayed hand-crafted items.

¶2. (U) Fatima Al-Ali, a columnist and author, opened the event by describing the obstacles and difficulties that Kuwaiti women continue to face in their lives and careers, and commenting that despite such challenges, Kuwaiti women have persevered. She called on women to start planning for the 2007 elections and to work together to change Personal Status Laws which remain a barrier to women's equality.

¶3. (U) Aisha Al-Rashaid, one of the first women to announce her candidacy for the National Assembly, talked about the role of women in the coming 2007 elections (ref D). Reiterating that women outnumber men in Kuwait, she said if women supported women and escaped the control of husbands, fathers, or brothers, women will be successful in the polls. She encouraged women to make their own choices for the benefit of their future and the good of Kuwait, and not to blindly follow the recommendations of men. She further encouraged women and local NGOs to focus on promoting political awareness instead of holding social functions. On the subject of her own campaign, she disagreed with those who discouraged her from running for election in Keifan because it "belongs" to Islamists or tribal elements. She said all areas belong to Kuwait, not particular groups of people.

¶4. (U) Al-Rashaid went on to describe her visit to a men's diwaniya (ref C). She said she visited not because she wanted to, but because she was invited. She was scared that if she did not perform well, it would reflect poorly on all Kuwaiti women. Upon arrival, she announced that she would shake hands with anyone who wanted to, and that those who did not want to could simply refuse to extend their hands. She was shocked that all of the men gathered shook her hand, even the "bearded ones," and told her she was like their sister. (Note: Conservative Muslims in Kuwait do not believe unrelated men and women should have physical contact, including handshakes. End Note.) They bombarded her with questions on many issues. At the end she was glad that they all agreed that Kuwaiti women are well-educated and can speak for themselves and their country.

¶5. (U) Commenting on the Municipal Council campaign of Jenan Bushihri, Al-Rashaid said it was a test case and encouraged Kuwaiti women to demonstrate their unity by supporting her candidacy.

16. (U) Ghanima Al-Fahed, a columnist and author, concluded the event by speaking on the historic role of women in Kuwait, who sustained themselves and their children while their husbands went pearl diving for months on end. This theme was echoed in a March 7 International Women's Day article by Shamael Al-Sharikh, a participant in MEPI-funded political training programs for women. Her article (text below) became instantly popular and is a new favorite among Kuwaiti bloggers.

Begin text:

DICHOTOMY

Why I am proud to be a Kuwaiti woman

Tomorrow is International Women's Day. It is a day officially recognized by the United Nations to mark the achievements of all women in the world. These achievements can be as grandiose as ascending to an executive position in politics or as grassroots as teaching rural women to read and write.

"But why should we care?" they will ask. "Why should women have a day of their own and not men?" they will reiterate. This would be the common reaction among most people, men and women. Let's face it, most men and many women will contest that Kuwaiti women have plenty of rights, and some might even say that their economic and social rights exceed those of men. With the National Assembly finally giving us the right to vote on May 16, 2005, and with Dr. Maasouma Al-Mubarak becoming minister and thus reaching the highest position any Kuwaiti citizen can reach in the government, it would seem that women are no longer permitted to lobby for anymore rights. Kuwaiti women have it all, it seems. They should be grateful for all the benefits they have in this generous land of equality and justice and not demand special treatment like a special day to appreciate

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women. They should just be proud to be Kuwaiti women.

I am proud, but for different reasons—for every one of our grandmothers who economically sustained herself and her children while her husband went pearl diving for months on end; for every mother who insisted that her daughter gets an education, even if it meant that she had to wear an abaya to school; for every mother and father who permitted their daughters to study in Beirut and Alexandria while other parents did not even allow their daughters to visit their neighbors; for every woman who was the first to work in television or the banking sector or education or medicine; for every woman who was always passed over for a promotion, because, let's face it, any young woman will eventually get married and forget about her career; for every woman who survived the embarrassment of never getting married, for every woman who dared to love and marry outside of her social stratum, for every woman who worked hard and helped her husband to raise a family; for every woman who put up with an abusive husband for the sake of her children. For every woman who endured the humiliation of the local divorce and custody laws and battled her husband for her family; for every woman who married a non-Kuwaiti and had her children treated as foreigners in their own land; for every woman who never gave birth to a male child. For every woman who gave birth to a handicapped child; for every woman who could not give birth at all; for every woman who was judged for wearing hijab because it does not conform to the ways of the Westernised, modern woman; for every woman who was judged for not wearing hijab because it shows that she does not respect her faith; for every woman who has to live with the double standards of a nation whose development has been stifled; for every woman who has taken a stance against this double standard, despite imminent ostracizing and rejection by her peers.

For all these women and their accomplishments, I am proud to be a Kuwaiti woman.

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